From That Eternal Silence
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by lionessvalenti

Summary

Charlie reveals his secrets when he meets up with Knox after five years.

Notes

The title comes from Ulysses by Lord Alfred Tennyson. Thanks to L for beta reading!

"What if my father finds out?" Neil asked.

Charlie grinned as he placed his hands on either side of Neil's face. "He won't. I promise. Look at us, we're careful."

The worry faded from Neil's eyes and he kissed Charlie again.

Autumn always made Charlie think of Welton. The way sunlight fell through red and orange leaves, the crisp scent of clean air. It was all the things he never noticed when he was actually *at* Welton. When he encountered them now, it was like the last five years had never happened.

He spooned sugar into his hot chocolate and gave it a stir. The waitress in the diner had asked if he wanted coffee when he walked in, but Charlie didn't like coffee. Who cared if the waitress thought it was weird that he, a grown man, got hot chocolate and found that it still wasn't sweet enough?

Charlie lifted his chin and glanced out the rain-splattered window just in time to see Knox climbing out of his car. He looked taller than Charlie remembered, wearing a grey wool coat and a matching fedora.

Charlie looked down at his own clothes: jeans and a blue and red rugby shirt leftover from his Welton days. He'd found it shoved in the back of a drawer at his parents' house. He hadn't put a lot of thought into what he was wearing, but now he realized it was a mistake. He wasn't in California anymore. This was was the east coast and there were different standards. He should have worn a suit, or at least a shirt with a collar.

The door opened and Knox stepped in. He removed his hat, and his eyes scanned the diner until he found Charlie. His face broke out in a grin and he all but ran to the booth. Charlie barely had enough time to stand before Knox's arms were around him.

"Jesus, Charlie," Knox mumbled into Charlie's shoulder. "There's nothing to you."

"I can't breathe," Charlie replied, and Knox released him.

"Sorry, but..." Knox gazed at him, grinning. "It's so good to see you. I can't believe it's been this long. How did that even happen?"

"I went to school three thousand miles away," Charlie said as they both sat down. "That had a lot to do with it."

Knox nodded, and the waitress came over to their table. "Coffee, please, thanks," he said, not taking his eyes off Charlie. "I'd heard about that. I didn't think a Welton student could even attend Berkeley."

"Only if they've been expelled."

"Touche -- thank you," Knox said, the second half directed to the waitress who brought him his coffee. He took a sip, no milk or sugar.

Charlie shook his head and picked up his extra sweet hot chocolate. "Tell me about Harvard. How was it?"

"It was... it was Harvard. I have no idea how I got in, and I wouldn't have gotten through if it wasn't for Meeks." Knox laughed. "We were even roommates sophomore year."

"So, nothing changes," Charlie said with a grin.

Knox rubbed his jaw with his hand. "Well, one thing. I mean, I have a girlfriend. Who's actually in love with me."

"Seriously?" Charlie asked. He tried not to sound shocked, but maybe he expected the Harvard workload to be too much for Knox to handle anything else. Or maybe the thought that Knox would meet someone just never crossed his mind.

"Seriously." Knox's eyes lit up and Charlie remembered that look. "Her name is Anna, she's a senior this year at Radcliffe. We met her freshman year and one thing led to another... we're planning on getting married in the summer. Her parents want her to graduate first. And I'll only have two years left of law school, so the timing's right."

"Just in time to start popping out a few kids," Charlie said before bringing his mug to his lips.

Knox choked out a laugh. "Yeah, maybe. But you'd love her, she's kind of a smart ass like you."

Charlie grinned. "So, you have a type."

"Har, har." Knox took another drink of his coffee. "Tell me about California."

"I studied business and I smoked a lot of weed because I was studying business."

Knox laughed. "That's amazing. How did you even convince your parents to let go there?"

"It was easy when I couldn't get into any of the east coast colleges they wanted me to go to. I had expulsion on my record, I barely graduated high school, and finally, they just wanted to get rid of me."

It was the short version, but not completely wrong.

"Oh come on, Charlie, your parents weren't that bad," Knox said with a laugh.

Charlie didn't laugh with him. He didn't even bother trying to cover his lack of a smile with his mug this time.

The smile dropped from Knox's face. "Charlie?"

"You ever think about Neil?" Charlie asked. He hadn't meant to say it, but on the other hand, what were they supposed to talk about? How could they possibly see each other after five years and not talk about it? How could they talk about anything else?

The color drained from Knox's cheeks. "All the time. Meeks and I, we were always trying to make sense of it. We never could."

"Me either," Charlie said. He stared into his mug. He wondered if Knox had noticed that it wasn't a coffee. "It was really hard after I got expelled. My parents couldn't find a school that would take me, even with all the money they could throw at them. I ended up going to public school and I barely even graduated from there. The work was easy, but I didn't care about it."

"You never cared about the work," Knox said. He stretched his hand across the table like he wanted to take Charlie's in his own, but Charlie kept his hands around his mug.

"Actually living with my parents was torture. My dad, he hated me because he knew I was never going to be what he wanted. And finally, I just... thought maybe Neil had it right."

"What?"

Charlie dared to look up and Knox looked exactly the same way he did

when he found out Neil was dead. Shocked. Devastated. It was the same pain.

"My parents found me and they covered it up," he said, glad that he didn't have to say the words out loud. He could never say it. "That's why they let me go to California. They thought if I could do something I wanted to do for a change, then I might be okay. My mom convinced him."

He'd never be able to forget his mother crying, and his father just kept saying the same thing over and over again. "What's wrong with you? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!" Charlie had finally managed to reply, the twentieth time his father asked. "Clearly, I'm perfectly fine!"

Three days later, they agreed he could attend any college he wanted to attend -- as long as he went to college, of course. Three thousand miles away was barely far enough.

"Jesus, Charlie," Knox said. "How the hell could you do that? You know what Neil's death did to us. How?"

"How? It was easy," Charlie spat. He dropped the mug and hot chocolate spilled onto the table. "You haven't seen me in five years. You wouldn't know the difference.

Knox's face paled as he stared at Charlie, but he recovered just as quickly. His eyes narrowed. "Fuck you, Dalton."

Charlie blinked. After years of shit talking, he'd learned what most people's responses to his lines was going to be, but that one surprised him. "What?"

"Fuck you," Knox repeated, maybe a little louder this time. The waitress, who had maybe been eavesdropping, gasped, but he paid her no mind. "What the hell do you think I've been doing for the last five years? I think about Neil all the time. He's like a ghost, and I imagine him going to school or acting in a play, or whatever he wanted to do. I think about all the things he could have been doing if he wasn't dead and I'm never going to be able to stop because he won't do any of it. It tears me up inside every single day. They tried to make us forget, to push us to move on, but none of us are ever going to be right ever again, and if you think for one second that you wouldn't haunt me the same way, you're a bigger idiot than I ever took you for."

For a few seconds that felt like hours, Charlie stared. Knox, now red faced, seemed kind of pleased with himself. Pissed off, but pleased.

Then, without any internal warning, Charlie began to cry and he couldn't stop. His shoulder shook with ugly sobs and he covered his face with his hands. *Fuck*.

"Shit, Charlie. Charlie, I'm sorry." Knox's arms were wrapped around Charlie, and it took him a second to realize that Knox had gotten up from his side of the booth and moved over to comfort him.

"I didn't graduate," Charlie mumbled after he thought he could control his words. It still shook, watery with his tears, but at least his voice didn't crack.

"What?"

He lifted his head and looked at Knox. He knew his face had to have been red and gross, but it was too late now. "I didn't graduate. I spent the last six months in an institution."

Knox held him a little tighter. "Why?"

"I tried again, and three thousand miles away, my parents couldn't cover it up. It turns out I'm depressed." Charlie forced a laughed and his gaze darted down at the table. "Me. Depressed. Who would have ever thought?"

Knox didn't laugh. "What happened?"

"I had this buddy, and he was in the spring play. Demetrius. I shouldn't have gone, but I told him I would." Charlie also happened to have been screwing this particular buddy, which had something to do with it, but it didn't seem pertinent to the conversation.

"Oh, that's bad," Knox said. "I can barely do Shakespeare at all anymore."

Charlie nodded and he could feel himself trembling despite Knox's firm hold on him. "I cried through the whole thing like a jerk, until it got to the end. And Puck is doing his monologue and I realize: those are the last words I ever heard Neil say. That was it, and he was gone. I obsessed over that for hours, I couldn't sleep, so..." He pulled up the sleeve on his shirt to reveal the silver gash from his wrist, halfway up his forearm.

"Shit," Knox mumbled, his hand wrapping around Charlie's thin arm.

"And then I was in the hospital, and then the psych ward, and then on the phone with my dad. He was telling me that we were past this. That they sent me to California so I could be past it. He thought it was over." Charlie looked up at Knox's worried face. "It's like you said. We'll be never be over it, and they can tell us that we've moved on, but we haven't, because they wouldn't let us. And it made us even worse. I'm broken, Knoxy."

Knox shook his head. "No, you're not. It's messed up, but you're not broken."

Charlie didn't think. He never thought, that was his problem. He didn't consider consequences. Impulsive, the doctors had called it. Manic.

He grabbed the lapels of Knox's jacket and pulled him in so he could kiss him. It had been five years, but it didn't matter. It felt so good to have his mouth pressed to Knox's. It was like they could be teenagers all over again, and Charlie could have the one thing he wanted when he was seventeen.

But Knox wasn't kissing him back. He wasn't stopping him, wasn't pushing him away, but he didn't kiss Charlie. Not the way Charlie was kissing him.

Charlie pulled back."Shit," he mumbled, covering his face and pressing his fingers into the corners of his eyes. "Oh, shit."

"It's okay," Knox said. He rubbed the back of Charlie's neck. "It's okay."

"It's not," Charlie said. He forced himself to breathe, loud breaths through his mouth. Knox was taking this all very well, but that didn't make it suddenly all right. "You just told me all about your girlfriend, and I..."

"Charlie, it's not like I didn't know. We all knew you about you and Neil. Homo at Hellton, it happens."

Charlie dared to look up. "We?"

Knox shrugged. "Meeks, Pitts, you know, the guys. Todd would have figured it out if you and Neil hadn't stopped doing it. Why did you stop?"

"This is turning into an inconvenience," Neil said fondly. His hand was

draped in Charlie's hair.

"You call that an inconvenience?" Charlie, with his head in Neil's lap, stretched his neck to look up at him, but he could barely make out his face through the halo of sunlight. He could only see light filtering through the autumn leaves. "I fellate with the best of them. And it's helping me with my Latin."

Neil chuckled. "We're not roommates anymore. Eventually it's going to get too cold to do this in the woods. And we shouldn't do this while you're in love with Knox."

Charlie sat up. "What? That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Neil raised an eyebrow.

"Knox just met his dream girl."

"And what about you?"

Charlie stared at him. For possibly the first time in his life, he had nothing to say.

"It was too hard since we weren't roommates," Charlie said. "And I couldn't do anything with Cameron around. I would have been expelled even faster that I was. And Neil wasn't a homo. I knew it wouldn't last, but... I convinced him, Knox. I promised him his father wouldn't find out, and we got away with it."

Knox's brow furrowed. "What are you saying?"

"If he hadn't gotten away with that, maybe he wouldn't have thought he could get away with the play."

Now Knox was staring at him, wide eyed. He suddenly looked young again. "Jesus, Charlie, do you blame yourself for Neil's death?"

Charlie swallowed. He could feel his eyes burning with tears, but he wasn't going to start crying again. "Someone has to be responsible. Cameron was right, if Neil hadn't thought he could do it, he never would have."

"No, no." Knox pulled Charlie in for a tight hug, shoving Charlie's face into his chest. "You're no more responsible than Keating or even Mr. Perry. Neil was going to do what he was going to do. Whether that was the play, or you, or... even..."

"I didn't want to die," Charlie whispered. "I just didn't know what else to do."

It sounded stupid, but it was so much easier to talk to Knox than it had ever been to talk to his doctors. He'd just wanted to be an asshole with them. He wanted to impress them with how clever he was, and how distinctly *all right* he was. It wasn't any different than Welton or Berkeley had been.

Knox kissed the top of Charlie's head. "I know."

Charlie closed his eyes. Knox still smelled like he did five years ago, something soothing, mixed with the scent of wool. Charlie could have fallen asleep right there in Knox's arms.

"Hey, Charlie, we should go," Knox said, shaking him a little bit.

Charlie looked up and followed Knox's gaze to where the waitress of openly gaping at them. Of course she was. They had been crying, kissing, and now they were clinging to each other for God's sake. Once she stopped being so shocked, she was probably going to call the police.

He nodded and untangled himself from Knox's arms. He reached into his pocket, retrieved a crumpled dollar bill, and dropped it on the table.

Knox slid out of the booth and pulled on his coat. Before he dropped his hat on his head, he tipped it at the waitress. "Ma'am," he said, and started for the door.

Charlie followed him out and the crisp air was relief on his hot face. It had stopped raining, but the scent of it lingered in the air.

"Where's your car?" Knox asked, already starting toward his own.

"I took the bus," Charlie replied, like he always took the bus and not because his parents were afraid he was going to run their precious car off the nearest cliff the first chance he got.

Knox just nodded. "We'll take mine, then." He reached for the door handle as Charlie started around the car for the passenger side. "You still like women, though, right?"

Charlie stared at him. What a weird thing to ask. "Tits, Knox. Tits. Come on."

Knox laughed. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Get in."

They had just pulled out of the parking lot when Knox motioned for Charlie to slide across the bench seat toward him. Charlie did, and Knox wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"Did your buddy come visit you in the institution?" Knox asked. He sounded cautious, like maybe he was reading too much into it, but he just had to know.

Charlie shook his head as he slumped down in the seat. He rested his head against Knox's chest. It was kind of like sitting at the drive-in, but he'd never been on the passenger side. It was nice.

He didn't know where Knox was taking him, and none of it was going to solve his problems, but it didn't matter. It was just good to know someone had his back again.

"He called a couple times, but I think he was afraid that if he showed up, they'd throw him in there, too."

"Asshole," Knox muttered.

"When did you get so cool?" Charlie asked with a smile.

"I've always been cool."

Charlie closed his eyes. "No, you were a poet."

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